DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 428 CS 014 122

TITLE	Four Blocks.
INSTITUTION	Education Commission of the States, Denver, CO.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	8p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Education Commission of the States, 707 17th St., #2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427. Tel: 303-299-3600; Web site: http://www.ecs.org.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Heterogeneous Grouping; Individualized Reading; *Instructional Effectiveness; Instructional Materials; Phonics; Primary Education; *Program Content; Program Descriptions; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Programs; Reading Research; Reading Writing Relationship; Word Study Skills
IDENTIFIERS	Book Clubs; Guided Reading Procedure

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the Four Blocks framework, a teaching framework developed by professional educators, that aims to teach all children to read by providing daily exposure to a variety of instructional approaches. Four Blocks is intended for use in regular, heterogeneously constructed K-3 classrooms. It supports individual learning styles through the use of four different teaching strategies or blocks: Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing, and Words. The framework allows at-risk students to receive specialized programming, such as Reading Recovery or Success For All, and to benefit from this model as well. Children of varying ability levels are assigned to each group to reduce the potential for peer- and self-perception as a poor reader. Case studies support the effectiveness of the Four Blocks approach. Since 1990, the program has been implemented in first-, second-, and third-grade classrooms in all states throughout the United States. Sections of the paper discuss background, philosophy and goals, program components, evidence of effectiveness, professional development and support, implementation, costs, considerations, contact information, and policy issues and questions. (Contains 13 references.) (SR)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 447 428

Four Blocks.

CS 014 122

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

S F Walker

1

2

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Four Blocks

**Background - Philosophy and Goals - Program Components - Evidence of Effectiveness
Professional Development and Support - Implementation - Costs - Considerations
Policy Issues and Questions - Resources**

Topic or Category: Reading
Grade Level: K-3
Target Population: All Children

OVERVIEW

Background and Scope:

Developed by a literacy expert from Wake Forest University in collaboration with classroom teachers, the Four Blocks framework was introduced in 1989-90 in a single suburban 1st-grade classroom with a diverse student population. The model features mixed-ability grouping and daily instruction using four teaching methods to meet every child's "learning personality." Since 1990, the program has been implemented in 1st-, 2nd- and 3rd-grade classrooms in all states throughout the country. Two states have developed statewide training models.

Unlike other intervention approaches, Four Blocks is not a school restructuring intervention. Instead, it is a teaching framework for use in regular, heterogeneously constructed classrooms. The framework allows at-risk students to receive specialized programming, such as Reading Recovery or Success For All, and to benefit from this model as well.

Philosophy and Goals:

The Four Blocks framework was developed by professional educators who believed that to be successful in teaching all children to read, teachers must provide *daily* exposure to a variety of instructional approaches. Four Blocks supports individual learning styles through the use of four different teaching strategies or blocks -- *Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing* and *Words*. These strategies are nonability-grouped and focus intermittently on the students' various levels of reading ability. The program complements but does not supplant other interventions such as Reading Recovery or Success For All.

Children of varying ability levels are assigned to each group with the intent to reduce the potential for peer- and self-perception as a poor reader. Additional support is provided for children who struggle and for those who learn quickly.

Program Components:

The program consists of four teaching models, each presented daily at a time scheduled by the teacher according to classroom needs:
Guided Reading assigns children from all reading levels into small-group sessions called "book-club" groups. The objective is to teach comprehension and mastery of progressively more difficult material through exposure to a wide range of literature.
Self-Selected Reading usually begins with the teacher reading aloud. Next, children read on their own, selecting from a variety of books the teacher has gathered. This block may include a small group reading an easy book with on-level instruction. The block usually ends with one or two children sharing their books with the class in a "readers' chair" format.
Writing starts with a 10-minute writers' workshop in which the teacher models the writing process. The

children write their own stories on topics of their choice. The teacher helps the children revise, edit and publish their writing. The block ends with an "author's chair," with several students describing their work in progress or published books.
Words begins with the "Word Wall," a 10-minute review of frequently occurring words posted above or below an alphabet (five new words per week). Students practice new and old words daily. Children learn spelling patterns using phonics to read new words and learn the patterns that allow them to decode and spell new words.

Evidence of Effectiveness:

Little large-scale empirical research has been conducted on this method. In the past decade since the Four Blocks framework was used
initially in one 1st-grade classroom, however, schools and districts throughout the country have implemented the instructional strategies. The Indiana Department of Education is gathering multi-site data at 32 schools currently using the Four Blocks framework. Research findings are not available at this writing.

A developer-authored article in the May 1998 issue of *The Reading Teacher* (see reference below) reports on the long-term development, implementation and assessment of the Four Blocks approach. Following is a summary of four case studies in which different schools report their findings after implementing Four Blocks.

Case Study One:
Clemmons Elementary School in Clemmons, North Carolina, was the first large suburban school with a diverse student population to implement the framework. In any year, approximately 20-25% of the children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, and 25-30% are minority. All classes are heterogeneously grouped and contain an average of 22 children.

At the end of each year, children are given the Basic Reading Inventory. Across five years, instructional level results have remained consistent.
At the end of 1st grade, 58-64% of the children read above grade level (3rd grade or above); 22-28% read at grade level, and 10-17% read below grade level (preprimer or primer).
At the end of 2nd grade, the number of students reading above grade level (4th grade or above) increased to 68-76%; the number at grade level was 14-25%; and the number reading below grade level dropped to 2-9%.
Standardized test data on these children collected in 3rd, 4th and 5th grades each year indicate that 90% of the children are in the top two quartiles. Most years, no children's scores fall in the bottom quartile. This school does not do standardized testing until the end of 3rd grade.

Case Study Two:
Lexington One in Lexington, South Carolina, is a suburban, southeastern school district with eight elementary schools, in which 25% of the children qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. During the 1995-96 school year, approximately half of the 1st-grade teachers chose to field test the Four Blocks model.

In January 1996, a mid-year assessment of 200 1st graders was conducted. Students were randomly selected, with half from classrooms using the Four Blocks framework and the remainder from classrooms using traditional instructional strategies. Students were administered the Word Recognition in Isolation and Word Recognition in Context sections of the Basic Reading Inventory (Johns, 1994). For the Word Recognition in Context section, students in the Four Blocks classrooms scored, on average, at the beginning 2nd- grade level. Students in the other 1st-grade classrooms were on average reading at the 1st-grade, second-month level.

In May 1996, the district conducted an evaluation involving all 557 1st graders in Four Blocks classrooms. Students were administered the Metropolitan Achievement Tests (MAT). Each child was matched with a 1st grader from the 1994-95 school year, based on his or her scores on the Cognitive Skills Assessment Battery (CSAB), a reading readiness test administered to both cohorts during the first

week of school.
Total reading mean score for 1st graders in Four Blocks classrooms was significantly better than total reading mean scores for students in previous years for all levels.
In grade-equivalent terms, the average total reading score for 1st graders using the Four Blocks framework was 2.0 (2nd-grade level), while average total reading scores of the 1994-95 matched students was 1.6 (1st grade and six months).
Comparisons between the two classes (1995-96 and 1994-95) were made by splitting each cohort into three subgroups based upon their CSAB scores. Analysis demonstrated that children at all ability levels profited from the Four Blocks instruction framework. There was a 15-point difference at the lower level, a 23-point difference for the middle level and a 28-point difference for the upper third.
The district concluded that organizing students in this nonability-grouped framework helped the struggling students and was even more successful for students traditionally placed in the top reading group.

Case Study Three:
Brocking Elementary School in Timmonsville, South Carolina, is in a small rural district in which 84% of students qualify for the free and reduced-price lunch program. Based on low achievement test scores, the school had been placed on the list of the state's lowest-performing schools and was mandated to use different strategies each school year for five years to correct the problem.

During the 1995-96 school year, a group of teachers voluntarily implemented the Four Blocks framework.
Results on the Metropolitan Achievement Tests (MAT) administered in 1996 to all 1st and 2nd graders indicated that 30% of 1st graders and 38% of 2nd graders had total reading scores at or above the 50th percentile. In 1997, 46% of 1st graders and 40% of 2nd graders had total reading scores at or above the 50th percentile.
Percent of students meeting the state reading standard increased from 60% in 1996 to 87.8% in 1997.
End-of-year data convinced district officials that differences are attributable to the balanced instruction of the Four Blocks framework which 1st and 2nd graders received that year.

Case Study Four:
Parkway School System is located outside St. Louis, Missouri, where some students are bused from the city to achieve racial integration.
Two schools participated in a pilot study of the Four Blocks framework during 1995-96. The Gates McGinitie Reading assessment was administered at both schools in the fall and in the spring.
Fall scores on the Gates McGinitie Reading test showed no statistically significant difference between the two groups of students. In the spring, however, scores at the pilot school using the Four Blocks model were higher than scores at the control school.
The Fall NCE reading score for the pilot school was 56.8, and increased to 66.1 on the Spring exam. The control school's Fall reading NCE was 55.1, but dropped to 54.7 on the Spring exam. (*For any test, at any grade, an NCE score of 50 is "average" and thus equals grade level. Although it is not totally accurate, NCE gains can be thought of as approximating percentile gains.)
Analysis of different reading levels at each school indicated that all types of students performed better with the Four Blocks framework.

Case Study Five:
Warren Consolidated Schools in Warren, Michigan, designed an experimental test of the Four Blocks framework compared to a more traditional basal reader framework. Teachers were divided into two comparison groups, both using the system-adopted basal but using different teaching strategies.

From 14 classrooms, 62 students were randomly selected for extensive testing. The following tests were administered throughout the year: alphabet recognition, words known, dictated sentences, an IRI, a spelling test, Botel Word Opposites and writing samples. Surveys were filled out by the teachers and parents of the students involved in the study.
Test data collected indicated that, although the pilot group of students using the Four Blocks framework included more students who were male, on medication and bilingual, all the results on the individual tests for the Four Blocks children surpassed those of the control group receiving traditional instruction.

For example, the test results indicated that more pilot group students (70%) were reading at the "independent" level (95%+ accurate in word recognition) than the control group (35%). In addition, far fewer pilot group students (21%) were reading at the "frustration" level (less than 90% accurate in word recognition) compared to the control group (41%).
School system leaders concluded they would promote this framework within all 1st-grade classrooms in their district.

Professional Development and Support:

Professional development related to implementation of the Four Blocks framework depends upon the needs of each site. Two teacher training videos, *Building Blocks* (K-level) and *Four Blocks* (primary level), and reference books are available through Innovative Educational Support Systems (I.E.S.S. Inc.) in Kernersville, North Carolina (800-644-5280). Additional supporting information is available within a Web site (http://www.teachers.net/4blocks/) maintained by the program's education consultant.
Expenses for onsite training depend upon school location and needs.

Implementation:

The Four Blocks framework is not a commercial program or a curriculum, but rather an instructional delivery system. Little beyond the materials needed for any good language arts program is necessary for implementation. Students use both basal readers and trade books. One consideration for implementation is that a teacher must have 100-125 multiple copies of trade books per month, or approximately 900-1,125 books during nine months of instructional time. By staggering the self-selected reading block at different times of the day, same-grade-level teachers could use the same books, which would decrease the overall number of books needed.

Ideally, schools should implement the Four Blocks when all students are present so every child can receive instruction under every method. Scheduling the daily guided reading block should occur when children who receive out-of-classroom services, such as Reading Recovery, are not present since these are equivalent modes of instruction. Teachers may prefer to have additional adult support, such as parent volunteers or paraprofessionals, during the guided reading and writing blocks.

Guided reading is the hardest block to accommodate all reading levels because the teacher must select a set of books with similar themes, but written for different reading abilities. Students select the books they want to read in these "book-club" groups, and the teacher must assign students with differing abilities to each of the different groups.

Costs:

Budget expenditures for implementation vary, depending upon the amount of training and materials required. The most expensive budget requirement is for multiple copies of a wide variety of books for students to use in the self-selected reading block. Information regarding costs is available in the *Getting Started on a Budget* article on the Web site (http:///.teachers.net/4blocks/article12.html). A moderate cost estimate for implementation of Four Blocks is $162 per student

Considerations:

Due to its comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, the Four Blocks framework would fit most existing school settings, provided classrooms are heterogeneously grouped. The model is designed to organize and build on common approaches to reading, which recognize the complexity of reading and literacy. The components of the framework include phonological awareness, student empowerment and whole language. Four Blocks encourages teacher inquiry, focusing on explicitly improving literacy outcomes and representing a viable alternative approach in schools that emphasize teacher decisionmaking over implementation of systematic reforms.
As cited in the Implementation section above, one consideration is that a teacher must have 100-125 multiple copies of trade books per month, or approximately 900-1,125 books during nine months of instructional time. The number can be reduced by staggering the self-selected reading block at different

times of the day.

Information posted on the teacher.net Web site provides more details regarding implementation that may need to be considered by individual sites.

Contact Information:
Four Blocks
Patricia M. Cunningham
Wake Forest University
P. O. Box 7266
Winston-Salem, NC 27109
Phone: (336) 758-5583
Fax: (336) 758-4591
E-mail: cunningh@wfu.edu

Policy Issues and Questions:
How can states help districts and schools choose the most appropriate reading programs to improve students' skills and performance? What information would be useful?
Should states promote particular reading programs for districts and schools to use?
How can a reading program's track record be checked and validated?
What criteria should states and districts use to invest in various reading programs initially and for the long term?
How should policymakers weigh the benefits of a reading program versus its cost and required resources? Can a balance be struck between effectiveness and efficiency?
What state policies can help improve teacher training and professional development so teachers are better equipped to help all students read successfully?

Resources:
Cunningham, Patricia M. *The Four Blocks In Classrooms That Work.* [Online]. Available: www.wfu.edu/~cunningh/fourblocks/.

Cunningham, Patricia M., and Hall, Dorothy P. (1996). *Building Blocks: A Framework for Reading and Writing in Kindergartens That Work.* Clemmons, NC: Windward Productions.

Cunningham, Patricia M., and Hall, Dorothy P. (1996). *Making More Words.* Torrance, CA: Good Apple.

Cunningham, Patricia M., and Hall, Dorothy P. (1996). *Making Words.* Torrance, CA: Good Apple.

Cunningham, Patricia M., and Hall, Dorothy P. (1996). *Month-By-Month Phonics for First Grade.* Greensboro, NC: Carson-Dellosa Publishing.

Cunningham, Patricia M., and Hall, Dorothy P. (1996). *Month-By-Month Phonics for Second Grade.* Greensboro, NC: Carson-Dellosa Publishing.

Cunningham, Patricia M., and Hall, Dorothy P. (1996). *Month-By-Month Phonics for Third Grade.* Greensboro, NC: Carson-Dellosa Publishing.

Cunningham, Patricia M., and Hall, Dorothy P. (1996). *Month-By-Month Phonics for Upper Grades.* Greensboro, NC: Carson-Dellosa Publishing.

Cunningham, Patricia M., and Hall, Dorothy P. (1996). *The Four Blocks: A Framework for Reading and Writing in Classrooms That Work.* Clemmons, NC: Windward Productions.

Cunningham, Patricia M.; Hall, Dorothy; Defee, Margaret (1991). "Nonability-grouped, Multi-level Instruction: A Year in a First-grade Classroom." *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 44, no. 8, pp. 566-571.

Cunningham, Patricia M.; Hall, Dorothy; Defee, Margaret (1998, May). "Nonability-grouped, Multi-level instruction: Eight Years Later." *The Reading Teacher*. vol. 51, no. 8, pp. 652-664.

Harris, Karen R.; Graham, Steve; and Deshler, Donald (Eds.) (1998). *Teaching Every Child Every Day: Learning in Diverse Schools and Classrooms (Advances in Teaching & Learning Series)*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

Sigmon, Cheryl M. (1997). *Implementing the Four-Blocks Literacy Model*. Greensboro, NC: Carson-Dellosa Publishing.

[redacted]

Please note that information issued by ECS strives to combine the best of the most recent and most valuable research available. Should you have questions on any aspect of information provided by ECS, please contact our Information Clearinghouse at 303-299-3675.
Copyright © 1999 by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). All Rights Reserved.

Education Commission of the States • 707 17th St., #2700 Denver, CO 80202-3427
303-299-3600 • FAX: 303-296-8332 • E-mail: ecs@ecs.org • Internet: www.ecs.org

PEAK
WEB SOLUTIONS
303 792 2312

BEST COPY AVAILABLE